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ABSTRACT

The latter part of the twentieth century has brought explicit emotional appeals; some by advertisers for commercial goods and others from political and religious leaders. The religious appeals to feelings can be traced back in history to the revivals in the mid-eighteenth century where the "Great Awakening" opened up religious sermonizing to a new and powerful evangelism. The sermons by the Puritan preachers of this period played an important role in awakening listeners to their state of sin and to the hope of salvation. The style of their sermons was not meant to impress but to reveal. There was, however, a moderation in most of the Puritan clergy that was a balance between reason and emotion. They did use tropes, especially metaphor, dramatic elaboration, and other stylistic maneuvers, but the balance between reason and emotion was weighted more to the side of logic as the primary means of persuasion. In the end, the revivalism diminished, but uses of emotional appeals did not. The Great Awakening left, among other things, a legacy of evangelism. And just as clearly, the moderates of the Great Awakening, who espoused a balance between rational and emotional appeals and sought to convert the whole person--these preachers also left a legacy, a legacy of tolerance and practical wisdom. (MS)

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The Power of Eloquence: Moderation of Style in Puritan Great Awakening Sermons

Here in the latter part of the twentieth century, we are used to explicit emotional appeals. Television and magazine advertisements, often blatantly and sometimes surreptiously, try to manipulate our fears, our hopes, our desires. Such appeals are, of course, not limited to commerce of goods. Political and religious leaders -- as we all know nowadays -- have become famous and infamous for their use of emotional appeals.

However, there was a time when such appeals to our feelings were regulated, as it were. Then came a series of religious revivals in the mid-eighteenth century. By no means the only source of the de-regulation of persuasion via emotion, the Great Awakening nevertheless did open up religious sermonizing to a new and powerful evangelism that relied heavily upon appeals to the feelings as well as the thoughts of the listeners.

The newness of this kind of conversion experience cannot be impressed upon us strongly enough. As Harry Stout has written, "To modern observers accustomed to two centuries of religious revival, campfire meetings, lay testimonials and preaching, and the separation of church and state, the novelty of the Great Awakening is hard to understand." Indeed, in

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many ways the whole culture of the New England Puritans was quite foreign from our own. And yet, in that culture lay the seeds of much of our own rhetoric -- religious and otherwise.

The importance of sermons to the early colonial Puritans can hardly be exaggerated either. Sermons clearly dominated public communications in colonial New Englandbeing delivered twice on the Sabbath and again in a lecture-sermon given on Thursdays. All these sermons aimed at one goal -- the conversion of the listener. But just how to effect that conversion? This question lay at the heart of the Great Awakening.

But conversion to the Puritan meant something a bit different from what we might think. According to Calvinist doctrine, the person being "converted" had already been elected by God for salvation.

A major principle of Calvinism is that of limited atonement. Puritans believed in justification (or God's judgment) by faith alone; human works, good or bad, could not affect their salvation. Yet, for the psychological sake of society, they needed some force to encourage good works. Puritanism walks a tightrope between **antinomianism** and **arminianism.** The antinomian rejects entirely the concept of atonement for sins. After all, since God was all-powerful and all-knowing, His decision could not be affected, because He already knew everything. It's like the commercial for "Just Right" cereal. If it's just right, how can it be improved?

That would mean that before it hadn't been just right, but it had been just right, so now it has to be better than just right, which is impossible. If God's decision could be affected by human actions, that would mean that He didn't know everything in advance, but He did, and so He couldn't, and so on. On the other hand, the Arminian rejects the notion that atonement is all that limited. For the Arminian, good works as well as faith -- perhaps more than faith -- can affect God's decision about a person's salvation.

Puritans sought a balance that retained justification by faith alone but also encouraged good works. They did it by erecting an elaborate conversion morphology that could only be measured by observation. The Puritans achieved their balance by noting that the only way to tell a saint from a sinner is by observing his or her behavior. By becoming careful watchers of the behavior of those who claimed conversion, the Puritans sought to detect the specific pattern of conversion. Still, that conversion represents internalized experience. First, I make an examination of my life; I recognize that it is sinful. Then, I despair of salvation, and experience "a true humiliation of heart," as the Puritan theologian William Ames called it. Then, I am awakened to the hope of salvation. I undergo a preparation, and finally, my own election is revealed to me. Thus, conversion for the Puritan meant not a conversion from sinner to saint so much as a recognition of election.

The sermon could play an important role in this process. The Puritan preacher did not convert sinners into saints but rather helped to reveal to saints their election by God for salvation. The sermon could help to awaken the listener to his or her state of sin and to the hope of salvation. The style of the sermons was not meant to impress but to reveal.

Traditionally, historians have characterized the Great Awakening in terms of a dichotomy. Most importantly for a study of sermons, the two sides have been characterized as differing over the best way to convert listeners. Revivalists, referred to variously as "New Lights" and Evangelicals, emphasized the primacy of emotions in religious experience. Critics of the revivalists, called "Old Lights" and Rationalists, emphasized the primacy of rationalism.

David Harlan has argued, however, that viewing the Great Awakening strictly in terms of a dichotomy oversimplifies the position of these Puritan clergy, and he has offered support that I find compelling. Most Congregationalist ministers, he argues, were in fact moderates, welcoming the Awakening although with caution.

Mark Noll has argued for expanding the traditional dichotomy to "four more or less distinct groups":

1. radical New Lights, like James Davenport, who was clearly the most fanatical and theatrical of the Puritan revivalists and who argued for a separation from the established church;

2. moderate New Lights, like Jonathan Edwards, who argued for the primacy of emotion but not at the total expense of reason and who sought to remain within the Congregational Church;

3. moderate "Regular Lights" or "Old Calvinists," like Eliphat Adams, Andre Eliot, and Ezra Stiles, who searched for a balances between rationalism and evangelism and for compromise between New Lights and Old Lights;

4. and finally, Old Lights, like Charles Chauncy, who were theologically liberal and socially conservative and who tended to exclude emotional appeals from their sermons as completely as they could.

I would like to suggest that we take Noll's expansion one step further and view Puritan Great Awakening sermons as existing on a continuum between the radical New Light sermons of Davenport and the reactionary Old Light sermons of Chauncy. I have found in my study of these sermons a discernible concentration of them toward the middle, moderate points on the continuum. What makes the image of a continuum more appropriate is that it allows us to distinguish multiple sermons by single preachers, rather than lumping them all together. Many preachers, including Edwards, produced sermons that varied considerably in rational and emotive elements.

The superficial history of events seems to support a dichotomy. A series of local and somewhat regional revivals occurred in the 1730s, but the colonies as a whole caught fire

with the arrival in 1740 from England of a 24-year-old, itinerant, Anglican minister -- George Whitefield. He attracted crowds of unprecedented size and stirred up the emotions of listeners in a way that had never been done previously. He spent only 45 days in New England during that first tour, but he left behind a number followers so influenced by his example that many gave up their local ministries and became itinerant preachers themselves, and like Whitefield -- some much more aggressively even than Whitefield -- they attacked the settled ministers of New England, calling them "unconverted." In the following years, numerous confrontations between revivalists and non-revivalists occurred.

But the moderation of many, if not most Puritan ministers is evident both in their attitude toward revivalists and in the balance of rational and emotional appeals within their own sermons. Harlan offers several examples of moderate ministers' attitudes toward revivalists. There's Eliphat Adams, minister of the First Church of New London, Massachusetts, from 1709 to 1753. His attitude toward the revivalism is representative. Usually called an Old Light, he nevertheless invited Whitefield, and other evangelicals to preach from his pulpit. Rather than attempt to somehow quell the revivalism, he embraced it and even started his own little revival, preaching all day long for two Sundays in a row, then introducing another itinerant evangelical to continue the

revival the next Sunday. At the same time, Adams looked for ways to moderate the effects of extremist revivalists like James Davenport. It was under Davenport's influence that a large and, for the time, very shocking book-burning was held there in Adams' New London. The Boston Evening Post called these events "wild," "extravagant," and "indecent," and characterized the participants as carried away by a "flaming zeal" and "enthusiastic fury." After these shocking events, however, Adams continued to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable revivalists. Some he continued to invite to his church, while others he had arrested.

In fact, the moderateness of most Puritan clergy can be detected in many of their printed sermons. That a balance between reason and emotion was theoretically an ideal for many of these ministers can be seen in the explicit laying out of that idea by Jonathan Ashley, minister at Deerfield, in his sermon "The Great Concern of Christ for the Salvation of Sinners, and the Duty of his Ministers earnestly to persuade Men into his Kingdom." Ashley writes, "It is not enough that Ministers fling out many moving and affecting Words at Random: but they must treat Men as rational Creatures; for so did God himself . . . ." But on the next page, he balances that call for rationalism with a call for emotionalism. "When a suitable Degree of Knowledge is laid in the Understanding; and the Reason has been improved; then it is proper to rouse the Passions, that the whole Soul may be engaged to avoid the

approaching Vengeance of God." Ashley then delineates two ways of moving an audience: by awakening their fears; and by encouraging hope for their salvation.

Eugene White, in his book, Puritan Rhetoric, makes it very clear that at the heart of Puritan homiletics existed a balance of reason and emotion. The balance was weighted more to the side of logic as the primary means of persuasion, but the Puritans were not thoroughgoing Ramists, as Perry Miller and Wilbur Howell have suggested. They realized, no doubt from practice, that all the faculties were involved in the conversion process and that their sermons mirrored that process. Thus they structured their sermons to include both logos and pathos. The sermon begins with a text from Scripture and a "laying open" or explanation of the text; this explanation leads to a statement of Doctrine and reasons for accepting it as doctrine; and finally, the sermon ends with a Uses section, in which the doctrine is applied to the listeners everyday lives, oftentimes with the preacher directly addressing the congregation. The Application section was traditionally reserved for any emotional appeals. However, as White points out, the paradigm was not rigidly adhered to. Even early in Seventeenth Century New England, the structure was played with by the likes of John Cotton and Thomas Hooker. And certainly, in the Eighteenth Century, we have important examples of the primacy of emotional appeals, especially in the sermons of Cotton Mather and Soloman

Stoddard. The important thing to note here is that the prescribed structure of the Puritan sermon itself encouraged the inclusion of emotional appeals as well as rational appeals. And so, a sermon like Charles Chauncy's "Justification impossible by the Works of the Law," exemplifing as it does the Old Light emphasis on rationalism to the exclusion of any emotional appeals, ought to be seen as much as a break with tradition as the New Light sermons with their emphasis on the emotional.

"Justification impossible by the Works of the Law" is an example of Old Light sermonology at its driest. Chauncy has been described as being "thoroughly prosaic, wishing that some one would translate Paradise Lost into prose that he might understand it, despising rhetoric to the point of praying that he might never be an orator." Legend has it that upon hearing of this prayer a parishioner responded that it had no doubt been answered.

His sermon begins with a close analysis of the Scriptural text, even to the point of including lengthy etymologies of terms. Nor is Chauncy's Uses section much less dry. We may argue that the subject matter of this sermon -- arguments against justification by works -- determines the dry tone, and to a certain extent, that argument may be true. But we have only to look at how a New Light deals with the same material to see the difference.

In "The Heavenly Doctrine of Man's Justification Only by the Obedience of Jesus Christ," Andrew Croswell, another radical New Light, deals with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but in a much more emotional way.

> Is it not strange that God who judgeth according to the Law, should justify those who have broken his Law! But indeed he doth justify them; he justifies the ungodly -- Be astonished O ye Heavens at this! If Faith is in exercise, our Hearts must leap for Joy, to think there is Justification for us with God. Those Law-Breakers therefore whom God justifies, whom he not only pardons, but looks on as if they had fulfilled the Righteousness of the Law, are they who are made Righteous in the Sense of our Text. And what a glorious Priviledge is it to be made Righteous or Justified!

We can note in this passage the use of emotive interjections -- the cliched "O God" phrases that we have come to associate, whether rightly or wrongly, with evangelical sermonizing.

Great Awakening revivalists also used other devices to deliver their emotional appeals. The most notorious use of tropes, especially metaphor, is of course Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which in many ways is the epitome of radical New Light sermons. The variety of images used by Edwards include those of hell as an animal waiting to consume us, of God's wrath as a storm, a flood, and a bow and arrow, and of our souls as a spider held over a pit

of fire. In discussing the suddenness of death as a reason for conversion, Edwards states:

> It is no security to wicked men for one moment, that there are no visible means of death at hand . . . . The unseen, unthought of ways and means of persons' going suddenly out of the world are innumerable and inconceivable. Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering . . . . The arrows of death fly unseen at noonday . . . .

Compare Edwards' passage with this one from moderate preacher Andrew Eliot in "The Folly and Danger of Duplicity in Religion."

> Irresolution produces delay, and delays in this case are exceeding dangerous, because this is the only time of our probation, and this time may be very short. Nothing is more uncertain than the life of man. We know not what a day, what an hour, what a moment may bring forth; as death leaves us judgment will find us, which will determine our state forever.

Eliot uses metaphors sparingly, if at all, in his sermons. But he rarely participates in the scholastic reasoning that Chauncy does. In the Uses section of this sermon, he returns to this same point but with more heat.

> [Y]ou run a dreadful venture, every moment you neglect this important interest . . . . You have spent a great deal of time in vanity and folly, your thoughts have been

> employed in contrivances to gratify your appetites and passions. You have been enquiring how you should be rich and great in this world. Thus you have been dead, while you lived, dead to all rational purposes of living. Tis time to awake out of sleep.

Another important device these preachers use to heighten the emotional appeal of their sermons is dramatic elaboration, either through retelling and expanding on Biblical stories, or through the creation of new stories, especially involving dialogue. Jonathan Ashley's "The Great Concern of Christ for the Salvation of Sinners, and the Duty of his Ministers earnestly to persuade Men into his Kingdom" provides a good example. Early in this sermon, Ashley sets out to show Christ's concern for humankind. To do so, he turns to dramatic narrative.

> When God the Father proposed the Recovery of a Number of the fallen Race of Adam; and made known the Design he had of a rich Display of his Grace in their Salvation; and declared, that in Order to [do] this, some one must become a Surety for them, and pay the full Price of their Redemption: Then it was there was Silence among the Angels: no one dar'd to step in between an offended God and sinful Man: Nor was any Man found, who could undertake this great Work: But now, behold the Willingness and Readiness of the Son! how freely does he

> offer himself on our Behalf! and say to the Father, Lo! I am come to do thy Will.

Finally, moderate Puritan preachers of the Great Awakening, though they did not distinguish themselves with figures of speech and dramatic narratives as readily as New Light preachers, did avail themselves of many other, less striking stylistic manuvers in their sermons. For instance, in "The Folly and Danger of Duplicity in Religion," a sermon that I am particularly fond of, as you might guess, Eliot uses an abundance of parallelism and antithesis, and of polysyndeton (the deliberate use of many conjunctions). The conjunctions are used to connect not just clauses but also nouns and verbs, and especially into dichotomous units. These devices are particularly appropriate in this sermon, the subject of which is the "double minded man" or the hypocrite.

There are, of course, other examples of the same stylistic artistry too numerous to detail. Some preachers like Eliot were more adept at using them than others.

In the end, the revivalism diminished, but uses of emotional appeals did not. The Great Awakening among other things left a legacy of evangelism. Yet, just as clearly, the moderates of the Great Awakening, who espoused a balance between rational and emotional appeals, who sought to convert the whole person -- these preachers also left a legacy, a legacy of tolerance and practical wisdom.